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ABSTRACT

Research has identified high school and college students as the groups experiencing the greatest severity of loneliness. The manifestations of loneliness in adolescents and young adults were examined in a group of college (N=192) and high school (N=98) students. All subjects completed the Revised Loneliness Scale and a questionnaire about experiences with parents, peers, and school. College students completed the Loneliness Scale to reflect current feelings and the second questionnaire to reflect high school experiences. The high school students completed both instruments to reflect their current feelings and experiences. Analyses of the data identified 11 components of loneliness for each sample. Peer-related experiences dominated the components and the predictive models of loneliness. Six components (alienation, inferiority feelings, negative school experiences, social facility, social acceptance, and social integration) accounted for 72% of the variance in loneliness scores for high school students. Eight components accounted for 58% of the loneliness variance for the college students. Findings suggest that loneliness is accompanied by a variety of unpleasant feelings and negative perceptions of self and relationships with the social environment. (Author/NRB)

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, Houston, TX, April 16-18, 1981.

Components of the Lonely Experience in Adolescents and Young Adults[1]

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Recent empirical works have identified high school and college students as the groups with the greatest severity of loneliness (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1979; Russell, in press; Seevers, 1972; Wood, 1978). Yet, these young people are surrounded by numerous opportunities to form relationships with readily available peers. If loneliness were simply dependent on the availability of social contacts, it would be problematic as to why adolescents and young adults would be more lonely than such relatively more isolated populations as the elderly. However, additional research has shown that it is the dissatisfaction with one's relationships that characterizes loneliness, rather than frequency or quantity of social contacts (Cutrona, in press; Hockenbury, Jones, Kranau, & Hobbs, 1978; Sermat, 1980).

Most of what is known about the experience of loneliness is based on data collected from college students. Although the phenomenon has been investigated in a variety of adult groups (e.g., the divorced and elderly), little information is available from younger sources. It is reasonable to assume that social interaction patterns, coping skills, and attributional styles are learned

[1]Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, Houston, April 1981.

prior to adulthood and retain a pervasive influence in later years. Thus, loneliness could be better understood through clarification of earlier developmental experiences. In a pioneering effort, Paloutzian and Ellison (in press) asked undergraduated a variety of questions concerning their childhoods, and found that loneliness was negatively related to the remembered quality of the parent-child relationship, degree of family togetherness, and the quality of childhood peer relationships. Similar results were reported by Brennan and Auslander (1979) in a survey of adolescents. Factor analyses of their data identified family, school, and peer settings as major areas of isolation for lonely teenagers. Related to the experience of loneliness were low self-esteem, perceptions of low parental nurturance and support, school disinterest and failure, and alienation from peers.

The present study was designed to explore further the manifestation of loneliness in adolescents and young adults. An additional goal was the preliminary investigation of the influence of prior experiences on those in the present.

Method

Subjects

In the first sample, questionnaires were administered to 192 undergraduates (age 17-20) in exchange for nominal course credit. The second sample consisted of 92 high school students. Both samples were approximately equally divided by gender.

Procedure

All subjects completed the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, in press) and a questionnaire regarding

a variety of experiences. The Loneliness Scale is a 20-item instrument to which subjects respond on a 4-point scale ranging from "very typical" to "very untypical." Statements refer to such experiences as perceived aloneness, social isolation, and disturbed interpersonal relationships. Half of the items are worded in the positive direction, with the remaining items worded negatively to control for response bias. The scale's concurrent validity has been demonstrated by significant correlations with similar constructs (e.g., anxiety and depression). In a regression analysis, a combination of social risk-taking, negative affect, and affiliative tendencies accounted for less of the variance in loneliness scores than did a single self-labeling item, thus lending some support for the scale's discriminant validity. Internal consistency has been demonstrated by alpha coefficients of .94 in two studies. No significant effects for gender or social desirability have been observed.

The experiences questionnaire was designed for use in the present study. Items were constructed to reflect experiences that current theory and research suggest are implicated in loneliness among high school and college students. These include feelings, perceptions, and behaviors associated with parents, peers, and school. Responses to each of the 40 items were made on a 5-point scale which indicated the frequency with which such experiences occurred.

Subjects in the college sample responded to the Loneliness Scale in terms of their current experience and to the second questionnaire retrospectively, as they typically would have responded in high school. The high school students completed all items as

they pertained to the present.

Results

In order to partition the variance in questionnaire items, data from each sample were subjected to a principle components analysis. An eigenvalue greater than 1.0 was used as the criterion for retention of a component, and the surviving components were rotated to simple structure using the varimax procedure (SAS Institute, 1979). Component scores were then entered into a moltiple regression equation to predict loneliness. In this analysis, the maximum R^2 improvement technique was used (SAS Institute, 1979). This procedure creates a series of regression models, adding one variable at a time and evaluating each addition for the maximal increase in explained variance.

Data from each sample produced 11 components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and their content was quite consistent across the subject groups (see Table 1 for a summary of the components). Nine of the 11 were identical, although appearing in slightly different order in the two analyses. The first four components identified in both samples reflected the three areas of isolation (peers, parents, and school) that were observed by Brennan and Auslander (1979) in their survey of adolescents. The first and fourth components were related to peers. In Social Facility and Popularity, items referred to subjects' perceptions of their ability to make friends easily, popularity, and comfort in interpersonal situations. Alienation was characterized by a preference for spending time alone, feeling "different" from others the same age, and the perception of being misunderstood by peers.

The component labeled Parental Disinterest was comprised of a variety of negatively toned items. Content included perceptions of parents as disinterested, too self-involved, detached, and non-nurturing. An exemplary item was "My parents don't spend enough time with me." The third component, Negative School Experiences, reflected a general dislike of school. Also appearing in the same position for both groups was Perceived Approval (component 6) which incorporated approval from both parents and peers.

Four additional components were common to both analyses, although their positioning varied. Social Integration, exemplified by the item "I am a member of a youth group," appeared as number 8 for college students and as 9 in the high school group. Inferiority Feelings (components 9 and 5, respectively) was made up of such negative subjective experiences as feeling inferior, awkward, depressed, and lacking in self-confidence. The last two components, reversed in order for the different samples, included Parents and Friends, and Academic Success. The former contained items acknowledging the presence of a best friend and some form of activity with parents. The latter is self-explanatory.

One component was found to be unique to each sample. For the college students, Social Involvement (number 5) contained a leadership item and items suggesting a reciprocal pattern of social initiation. Social Acceptance (component 8 in the high school sample) included such items as being liked by members of one's own sex and being accepted by age mates. The seventh component for each group was uninterpretable. Major contributing items for the college students were "I attended school regularly" and "At least one of my

parents eats dinner with me." In the high school sample, items included "My parents are ashamed of me," "I am a slow learner in school," and "My parents are too interested in their own activities."

Results of the regression of component scores on loneliness are presented in Table 2. For the college sample, eight components met the significance requirement for inclusion in the predictive equation. Current loneliness was related to remembered alienation, parental disinterest, unpleasant school experiences, and feelings of inferiority. Negatively implicated in current loneliness were memories of social facility and popularity, perceived approval, and social involvement. Unfortunately, the second most influential component was the one that was uninterpretable. In combination, these components accounted for 58% of the variance in loneliness scores.

In the high school sample, six components were retained in the regression model. Alienation, inferiority feelings, and negative school experiences were positive predictors of loneliness, whereas social facility and popularity, social acceptance, and social integration were negative predictors. Seventy-two percent of the variance in loneliness scores was explained by this combination.

Discussion

High school experiences clustered into nearly identical categories for college and high school students in spite of the fact that the first sample responded retrospectively. In both instances, six of the eleven components were directly linked to relationships with peers and two others (Perceived Approval and Parents and

Friends) were partially influenced by peer-related items. The disproportional representation of components that refer to interpersonal experiences does not reflect the nature of the items that were entered into the analyses. Subjects responded to almost as many items concerning parents as they did about peers. A reasonable explanation of the outcome is that adolescents tend to be very peer-conscious. During the teenage years, young people move away from their families and look to age mates for companionship, evaluation, and social comparison. Thus, the enormous influence of peers may color much of the individual's thoughts and behaviors.

For the high school sample, all but one of the components entering into the equation to predict loneliness were peer-related. The exception was Negative School Experiences. However, school is the major social arena for adolescents, and it may be assumed that one's attitudes about school will be affected by his or her feelings of "belonging" there. In support of this suggestion is the observation that the component labeled "Academic Success" did not appear as a predictor of loneliness.

Similar factors were related to loneliness in the college sample. Although the predictive ability of the regression model was weaker than for the high school students, it is interesting to note that high school experiences accounted for a large proportion of the variance in current loneliness scores after an elapsed interval of as much as three years. One variable implicated in the experience of loneliness for college students, but not for the high school group, was Parental Disinterest. It may be speculated that, although peer relationships provide the strongest influence on loneliness,

family relationships also contribute to a lesser degree. Whereas high school students may be dissatisfied with the quality of their interactions with parents, they are usually provided with at least a minimum of contact and a relatively secure home base. For the college population, most of whom are living away from home, the difficulty in forming satisfying relationships with peers may intensify the awareness of familial dissatisfactions.

The present findings are in agreement with other research, suggesting that loneliness is accompanied by a variety of unpleasant feelings and negative perceptions of one's self and one's relationship with the social environment. Although these data further add to the understanding of loneliness in teenagers and the effects of earlier experiences on loneliness in college students, the results are based on self-report. Additional research is needed to explore more objectively defined influences on loneliness in younger populations.

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Table 1

Components Identified in Analyses of High School Experiences Questionnaire

College Sample	High School Sample
1. Social Facility & Popularity	1. Social Facility & Popularity
2. Parental Disinterest	2. Parental Disinterest
3. Negative School Experiences	3. Negative School Experiences
4. Alienation	4. Alienation
5. Social Involvement	5. Inferiority Feelings
6. Perceived Approval	6. Perceived Approval
7. ?	7. ?
8. Social Integration	8. Social Acceptance
9. Inferiority Feelings	9. Social Integration
10. Academic Success	10. Parents and Friends
11. Parents and Friends	11. Academic Success

Table 2

Regression of Component Scores on Loneliness

Component	[a]Beta	[b]R^2
College Sample		
Social Facility & Popularity	-3.49	.16
?	3.22	.29
Alienation	2.51	.37
Parental Disinterest	2.51	.45
Perceived Approval	-1.83	.50
Social Involvement	-1.73	.54
Negative School Experiences	1.51	.57
Inferiority Feelings	1.14	.58
High School Sample		
Alienation	4.66	.28
Social Facility & Popularity	-3.63	.45
Social Acceptance	-2.95	.56
Inferiority Feelings	2.72	.66
Negative School Experiences	1.54	.69
Social Integration	-1.52	.72

[a]Beta values reflect coefficients in the final model.

[b]R^2 reflects amount of variance accounted for by each component in combination with those listed previously.